8 Assessment as recognition: An e-portfolio for valuing North America's linguistic diversity

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Abstract

Even though Canada is home to linguistically diverse populations, 'non-dominant' languages are frequently not recognised and undervalued in both mainstream society and education. In contrast with policy and curricula documents from provincial Ministries of Education supporting the use of multiple languages in classrooms and first language maintenance for minority language students, recent analyses of Canadian educators' discourse reveal a distinct lack of support for linguistic diversity in schools. This discrepancy, coupled with the reality of rapidly disappearing aboriginal languages, suggest a dire need for ideological and pedagogical change in relation to language learning and assessment. The creation and introduction of an e-portfolio (Language Integration Through E-portfolio, LITE) inspired by the European Language Portfolio (ELP) but designed specifically for the diversity of the Canadian linguistic landscape could function as a catalyst for introducing such change. LITE encompasses and goes beyond Canada's two official languages and includes (in the pilot version) two of the country's many 'heritage' languages, and one of the three of Canada's aboriginal languages that are secured from the threat of long-term extinction.

This paper presents a project, involving researchers and practitioners from Canadian and American universities and educational institutions, in collaboration with a European university, encompassing a multi-stage research process that comprises cycles of collaborative design and development of LITE, classroom trials, and collaborative revision of the drafts.

Introduction: Context and background of the project

Canada is home to a linguistically diverse population. Around 7 million Canadians (20.1% of the population) speak a language other than English and French at home; nearly 8 million (22.1%) people speak

French, and just above 20 million (57.8%) speak English (Statistics Canada 2012).

The diversity of the Canadian context results from the wealth of immigration languages on one side and of native and aboriginal languages on the other. The immigration movements dominated for centuries by the languages and cultures of the historic colonial powers, English and French, have relatively recently witnessed an exponential growth of linguistically and culturally diverse populations. This diversity represents a new layer that added up to the wealth of aboriginal languages of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. The result of this phenomenon is that, in addition to the official national languages, numerous aboriginal languages and a multitude of heritage languages are spoken in Canada. If we look deeper into these non-official languages, we see that they belong to very diverse linguistic families, of which the most represented are, in decreasing order, Indo-Iranian, Chinese, Romance, Germanic, Slavic and Aboriginal, which altogether cover 5 million speakers, followed by other smaller communities speaking languages of other families for the remaining 2 million speakers.

In spite of this extreme diversity though, Canada's linguistic and cultural diversity is still not widely known or as much of a commonly accepted reality as it could – and should – be. The dominant position of English and French, which are not only the country's official languages, but also internationally dominant languages, is a factor that needs to be taken into consideration when trying to understand why the value of linguistic diversity is still underestimated. As a matter of fact, linguistic diversity is *de facto* still seen as an issue rather than a potential resource. The problem is particularly serious and extensive for aboriginal languages, whose social and political recognition is a recent phenomenon, in spite of their ancient origin.

Canada is considered a linguistic 'hotspot' (Anderson 2010, 2011, Harrison 2007), as languages are vanishing more rapidly than in other parts of the world. Statistics from the past 25 years show that many aboriginal languages in Canada have undergone long-term declines in intergenerational transmission and mother tongue (first-language) populations, most suffering a steady erosion (Crystal 2000, Norris 2007, 2011) with their use being systematically discouraged (MacMillan 1998). In the world, it is estimated that between 50 and 90% of the languages spoken today will have become extinct by the end of the century (Evans 2010:212). Knowing that 'each language is a semiotic system of understanding the world, immeasurably rich in diversity of ideas expressed' (Crystal 2000:36), the disappearance of any aboriginal language would represent a great cultural loss not only for that community, but also for the culture of the country and of the world (Fishman 1996, Harrison 2007, 2010, Henze and Davis 2008).

The problem of lack of real recognition of language diversity is a complex

and somehow tricky one, which spans from language policies to the everyday language education practices.

Both mainstream society and education fail to recognise and value *non-dominant* languages (Hornberger 2002, Wiley and Lukes 1996). Homogenising and assimilationist language policies still prevail (Cantoni 1997, Connelly 2008, Hornberger 2002) in spite of the active voice of educators and academics who advocate for multilingual language policies that support cultural and linguistic diversity (Cummins 2001, García, Skutnabb-Kangas and Torres-Guzmán (Eds) 2006, Lo Bianco 2010). These policies contribute to the decline of home languages (Cantoni 1997, Crawford 2000) by perpetuating *de facto* a negative perception of bilingualism among many educators (unless bilingualism concerns the official languages).

Things are not improving at the tertiary level of education. In fact, while many institutions have made it part of their strategic plans to increase internationalisation through the recruitment of foreign students, resulting in a growingly multicultural and multilingual student population at Canadian universities, strategies to educate local Canadian students to become global citizens able to cope with the multicultural/multilingual environments and globalising experiences are strikingly underdeveloped. As it is already the case for secondary education, the focus is on proficiency in the language of instruction. Beyond paying lip service to the importance of linguistic and cultural diversity, no action is undertaken for valuing linguistic diversity. Any deviation to the norm is seen from a deficiency perspective, and there is no requirement, nor encouragement, for students to preserve or expand their linguistic and cultural capital.

In sum, despite there being a discourse in the public in Canada that multiculturalism is a good thing or valued, there is actually no mechanism for supporting it within the educational system. Above all, there is no support for helping practitioners overcome the current monolingual vision of education and accept and implement a plurilingual paradigm shift (Kramsch, Levy and Zarate 2008), something which implies ideological and pedagogical change (Piccardo 2014), where languages would cease to be considered in isolation and become elements acting concurrently and collectively to shape individuals' cognition, socialisation and identity.

Looking for possible ways to raise awareness of these issues, to help educators deal effectively with linguistic and cultural diversity, and to foster innovation in language education, colleagues and I focused on the pedagogical dimension and conceived of a project (LINguistic and Cultural DIversity REinvented, LINCDIRE) whose goal is to develop a tool (Language Integration Through E-portfolio, LITE) aiming at facilitating first language maintenance, supporting language diversity as well as encouraging plurilingualism among students in secondary and post-secondary institutions, through an explicit focus on the presence of multiple languages and cultures

in the classroom. The acronym LINCDIRE was introduced to mark the fact that our project broadened its initial scope and developed its conceptual apparatus. The initially envisaged tool was called Personal Language Portfolio (PLP). This tool has been replaced by LITE. As LITE encompasses and goes beyond the PLP, I will use LITE throughout the paper in order to avoid confusing readers, mentioning the PLP only when I am referring to development of the first part of the project.

The remainder of this paper will provide the rationale of this project, its underpinning theoretical framework as well as its methodology. I will start by defining the issues LINCDIRE intends to address; I will then describe the tool (LITE) and explain its conceptualisation and the methodology used to conceive of it. After a brief description of the state of the project, I will conclude discussing the implications and potential of such a tool for the Canadian, and in general the North American, context.

Linguistic and cultural diversity: Issue or resource?

In the Canadian context, at various levels, we are often faced with a double discourse: there is a great disparity between the extensive rhetorical support for multiple language use in the classroom expressed in official documents and the everyday teaching reality and practice.

At the national level a recent document issued by the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada (CMEC) (2010) underlines the importance and value of linguistic and cultural diversity and itemises it into several aspects such as recognition of pluriliterate competencies, a new vision of teaching to reflect language alternation among immigrant learners, transfer of discursive competencies from one language to another, acquisition of metacognitive strategies as a condition for ensuring development of academic skills and the promotion of socialisation and autonomy, or the use of integrated learning approaches. Needless to say, this document limits itself at suggesting principles and guidelines rather than reaching the operational level as education is under the purview of the provincial governments.

Various policy and curriculum documents from provincial ministries of education also appear to support the use of multiple languages in classrooms and first language maintenance for minority language students (Alberta Education 2010, British Columbia Ministry of Education 2009, Ontario Ministry of Education 2005, 2006). These documents advise teachers to encourage first language use in certain situations, providing theoretical justification for multiple language use by citing research that has illustrated the social and academic benefits of first-language maintenance and bilingualism (Cook 2001, Cummins 2007a, Cummins, Bismilla, Chow, Cohen, Giampapa, Leoni, Sandhu and Sastri 2005, Taylor, Bernhard, Garg and Cummins

2008). Nevertheless, teachers are not provided with the tools, resources, and support that they need to achieve these aims.

Still, all these proclamations and statements of intent could give the impression that Canada is moving towards more recognition and integration of language plurality in education. Unfortunately this is not the case: in contrast to this rhetorical support for multiple language use, recent analyses of Canadian educators' discourse reveal a distinct lack of support for linguistic diversity in schools. Schools typically mirror Canadian society, which sees homogeneity as a gauge of success (Connelly 2008). This also translates at the school level: homogenous schools are in fact 'considered apt to success, while a school with a high proportion of "underperforming" recent immigrants is seen as having a handicap' (Connelly 2008:166–167). Linguistic minority students frequently cease to use their first language in the classroom and even outside of it as they soon realise that others may perceive their linguistic status as failure and difference may be seen as inadequate performance (Connelly 2008, Flecha 1999). This trend is a contributing factor to widespread language attrition which affects students, families, linguistic or cultural communities, and the entire Canadian society.

In general, in spite of a solid scholarly research body that shows how bilingual and first language maintenance provides social, cognitive and academic benefits (Bialystok 2001, Cook 2001, Cummins 2007a, Fishman 1996, Taylor et al 2008), and even though Canada adopted an official policy of multiculturalism in 1988, approaches to multicultural education are viewed as *folkloric* (Gérin-Lajoie 2011, Haque 2012, Nieto 2004), and barriers include the stipulation that Heritage language instruction is only extra-curricular in provinces such as Ontario (Carlino 2009). In general teaching remains strictly monolingual, one language at a time, even in the case of immersion programmes, where each subject is taught in a specific language. The underlying assumption is that using more than one language in a course either through a comparative approach or any form of code switching, mixing or meshing, is detrimental to the learning process. Such vision does not make space for any non-curricular language and cuts students from their linguistic roots and identities. This is particularly serious for aboriginal learners as not only are aboriginal languages at risk but also 'many of the social dysfunctions plaguing aboriginal peoples and communities can be traced to the loss of language' (Little Bear 2009:22).

To sum up, the main obstacles towards a move from seeing linguistic and cultural diversity as an issue rather than as a resource are: (1) a mismatch between rhetorical, institutional discourse and educational reality when it comes to linguistic and cultural diversity; (2) a lack of recognition of the cognitive and academic value of linguistic diversity in everyday classroom reality; and (3) a lack of targeted pedagogical tools and support for practitioners. We are hoping to challenge the status quo and contribute to the

reduction of some of these obstacles by developing a flexible and effective tool for teachers, learners and communities, able to bring about new linguistic and pedagogical thoughts and processes.

LITE: Underlying theoretical framework

The theoretical framework underpinning LITE draws upon the notions of plurilingualism, critical thinking and indigenous epistemology and pedagogies. Each of these will be presented and explained in turn, starting with plurilingualism.

The notion of plurilingualism is quite distinct from that of bi- and even multilingualism. A plurilingual framework considers that linguistic competencies do not refer to several compartmentalised language competencies but to a dynamic and composite competence from which the social actor may draw (Coste, Moore and Zarate 1997), which includes partial competences rather than a balance of skills. Ultimately, it recognises the holistic and interconnected nature of language, identity and culture, and therefore treats proficiency as highly individualised, dependent on life paths, and subject to evolution and change (Coste, Moore and Zarate 2009, Council of Europe 2001).

Plurilingualism is a fundamental trait of a world characterised by mobility and change (Piccardo 2013), but we are often unaware of plurilingual competences in ourselves and others due to our monolingual social conditioning, or *monolingual disposition* (Gogolin 1994). Even bilingual and multilingual educational approaches (while better than *English only* environments) are still 'a pluralization of monolingualism' (Makoni and Pennycook 2005:147). Bi- and multilingual approaches often perpetuate the notion that language can be reduced to a linguistic system that is capable of existing independently from the social world (Makoni and Pennycook 2007). This ideology often corresponds with the valorisation of a *symmetric* version of bilingualism that positions equal competency in the first and target language as the primary goal for learners (Piccardo 2013). Unfortunately, this rather unrealistic goal often creates feelings of inadequacy in learners and diminishes their self-esteem. In fact, as students dwell on their *imperfect* competence in the target language, they may begin to perceive their language competency as a burden (Puozzo Capron 2009), which can create feelings of uneasiness and over time, insecurity and even hatred towards the second language (Piccardo 2013).

Rather than compartmentalising language competencies, plurilingualism grants significance to the relationships between lived experience and language use, and the relationships between all of the languages spoken by an individual (Piccardo 2013). It is a holistic approach that recognises that all languages are in an ongoing process of creation and modification (Wandruszka 1979), and therefore cannot be contained and positioned as a stationary target for learners.

At a global level, institutions are still struggling with integrating a plurilingual vision due to a rooted monolingual attitude, which sees each language as a discrete entity with definite boundaries and established rules. The paradigm shift from multilingualism to plurilingualism appears very challenging. The multilingual vision where languages are considered and taught separately and separately tested is deeply entrenched in the western, North American education system and school culture, something that, as we will explain later, makes opening to indigenous pedagogies even more challenging. Drawing upon the plurilingualism theoretical framework, LITE aims at facilitating this paradigm shift.

Adopting a plurilingual paradigm implies fostering linguistic and cultural/intercultural awareness, which in turn are strictly linked to the development of critical thinking, another focal point of LITE.

Let us consider the second notion we mentioned, precisely critical thinking. Following Benesch, who in turns refers to other researchers in the field, we define critical thinking as 'a search for the social, historical, and political roots of conventional knowledge and orientation to transform learning and society . . . in this view [Benesch argues] those who think critically focus on social inequities and probe the disparities between democratic principles and undemocratic realities' (1993:546). Critical thinking encompasses and goes beyond a pure cognitive view. A broader perspective embedded in the socio-cultural-historical dimension favours high-order skills such as analysis, synthesis or inference. 'We can adopt a cognitive orientation, inviting ESL [English as a Second Language] students to analyze, synthesise, and evaluate topics divorced from the social origins of these themes. Or, we can ask them to investigate their experience and its relationship to the language, politics, and history of the new culture. According to the view presented here, the latter approach is critical, the former is not' (Benesch 1993:547). This view of critical thinking encompasses and extends the classical view of critical thinking (Glaser 1941), which implies the attitude and disposition to consider problems and experiences in a thoughtful way and to examine any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of evidence, as well as the knowledge of methods of logical enquiry and reasoning and the capacity of applying these methods. It proposes a more holistic view of critical thinking, which sees individuals within the social and cultural context. The approach adopted by LITE embraces Benesch's version of critical thinking.

This vision of critical thinking is not only fundamental in the conceptualisation of LITE's theoretical framework but also helps to make the transition towards the third component of this framework: indigenous knowledge, epistemologies and pedagogies. As such it will act as leverage for connecting western and aboriginal pedagogies.

Indigenous knowledge refers to the wisdom, skills and experience accumulated by communities and nations living in different parts of the

Americas, Oceania, Africa and Asia covering over 5,000 languages and 70 nation-states (Battiste and Youngblood Henderson 2000). As stated by the United Nations[1] 'the heritage of an indigenous people is a complete knowledge system with its own concepts of epistemology, and its own scientific and logical validity' (Battiste 2002:7–8). Drawing from studies of several other scholars (Aluli-Meyer 2001, Deloria 1999, Ermine 1995, Friesen and Friesen 2002, Lane, Bopp and Bopp 1984), Leik explains that 'indigenous epistemology understands the world from a holistic perspective where all things, material and spiritual, are interconnected and interdependent . . . understanding the interdependence of all things requires attention to individual identity, relationships, and responsibility to the whole' (1992:19). Leik adds that 'indigenous epistemologies understand that all things are in a constant state of motion and change' (1992:20).

Indigenous epistemology is about acknowledging and honouring diversity rather than searching 'the truth', thus recognising that people have different perceptions of events is key. Indigenous epistemological perspectives are often expressed through the teaching of culture often in the form of stories and are the basis of indigenous pedagogy. According to Battiste, aboriginal epistemology is found in theories, philosophies, histories, ceremonies, and stories as a way of knowing. Aboriginal pedagogy is found in talking or sharing circles and dialogues, participant observations, experiential learning, modelling, meditation, prayer, ceremonies, or storytelling as ways of knowing and learning.

While we want to avoid essentialising either a western or aboriginal epistemological frameworks, i.e. considering them as having fixed traits and neglecting the wealth of variations they present, there are some salient similarities between the two that are apparent even in the early stages of this research. According to Battiste, 'focusing on the similarities between the two systems of knowledge rather than on their differences may be a more useful place to start when considering how best to introduce educational reform'(2002:11). In fact, she continues, 'Canadian administrators and educators need to respectfully blend indigenous epistemology and pedagogy with Euro-Canadian epistemology and pedagogy to create an innovative Canadian educational system' (2002:21).

In the same vein a model has been developed in the Australian context, which synthesises aboriginal pedagogies, but also aims at engaging educators in a dialogue between indigenous and mainstream pedagogies. This framework, called the Eight Ways Aboriginal Pedagogy Framework (Yunkaporta 2009), is organised around the following eight key concepts: 1) Story Sharing; 2) Learning Maps; 3) Non-verbal Learning; 4) Symbols and Images; 5) Land Links; 6) Non-linear Concepts; 7) Deconstruct/Reconstruct; 8) Community Links. This is how Yunkaporta unpacks them (2009:35–38): *Story Sharing* is about teaching and learning through narrative; *Learning Maps* is about

making learning pathways and processes explicit visually; *Non-verbal Learning* is about hands-on learning, critical reflection and least-intrusive management strategies; *Symbols and Images* is about exploring content through imagery and using visual cues and signals; *Land Links* is about place-based pedagogy, linking content to local land and environment; *Non-linear Concepts* is about indirect management strategies, lateral thinking, comparing and synthesising diverse cultural viewpoints, innovating, adapting, working with cycles and working with holistic knowledge; *Deconstruct/Reconstruct* is about modelling and scaffolding, balancing teacher instruction with independent learning and working from wholes to parts; *Community Links* is about grounding learning content and values in community knowledge, working on community projects and using or displaying knowledge products publicly for local benefit.

National borders as we said do not limit aboriginal knowledge insofar as they are a product of the western culture and they have been imposed on societies which pre-existed European settlers. Thus, even if the framework was developed outside of the North American context the model appears very appropriate for linking western and indigenous pedagogies and it was taken into consideration for the conceptualisation of LITE.

Battiste argues for education that 'moves beyond rule-based learning and considers life-long learning, learning how to learn in diverse contexts, and ability to apply knowledge to unfamiliar circumstances' (2002:16). Similarly, LITE will facilitate critical thinking such as using metacognitive strategies to reflect on learning processes and to learn how to learn. LITE, in the vein of the European Language Portfolio (ELP), will also support learner autonomy and life-long learning.

Above all, LITE will reflect the concept expressed by Battiste that knowledge is a 'living process to be absorbed and understood [rather than] a commodity that can be possessed or controlled by educational institutions' (2002:15), as it will provide the space for reflection on lived experiences (linguistic, intercultural, or otherwise), thus transforming the subjective experiences of all students into potential sources of knowledge. The aboriginal vision is reflected in aboriginal languages, for instance the focus on verbs of most indigenous languages instead of nouns as it is the case with western languages, namely English, conveys the understanding that life is a process (Ross 2006), thus the preservation of indigenous languages is fundamental to support indigenous views of education. With its focus on plurilingualism, LITE will not only serve this goal but also help create bridges between different languages, epistemologies and education visions.

Towards LITE: The LINguistic and Cultural DIversity REinvented (LINCDIRE) project

The discrepancy between Canada's linguistic diversity and educational environments that recognise and reward only majority language speakers, coupled with the reality of rapidly disappearing aboriginal languages, suggest a dire need for ideological and pedagogical change in relation to language learning and use. We may posit that the introduction of LITE, a language portfolio designed specifically for such a diverse linguistic landscape will function as a catalyst for introducing the necessary change. LITE will be a fully online tool, consisting of different parts (including more or less linguistic content), flexible, customisable and expandable.

The initial project started at the end of 2012 under the name of the Personal Language Portfolio Project (PLP) and gathered a team of four researchers from different Canadian provinces (Ontario, New Brunswick and Alberta) respectively and one from a US educational institution based in Vermont. One year later, one researcher expert in aboriginal studies joined the team to assure greater consistency between the western and indigenous pedagogies inspiring the PLP. Graduate students and practitioners assist this core group. The geographical main focus of the project is the Canadian context. The presence of the US institution was justified mainly by two reasons: the US institution represents an ideal terrain for trialling LITE due to its specific international character; and it allows for the exportability of the tool beyond Canada to be tested, stressing similarities rather than differences between the two contexts as far as linguistic and cultural diversity are concerned. At the end of 2014 the project was expanded to include two more institutions (one more from the US and one from France) which have expertise in dealing with language diversity. This will provide extra support in the domain of plurilingualism and will allow a broader experimentation of LITE thus strengthening its exportability. It also allowed for the inclusion in LITE of a second heritage language, Italian, which is the language of one of the largest communities not only in Canada but also in the two areas where the US and French institutions are located.

All the members of the project team are active in applied linguistics and language education and/or teacher development. They are all familiar with the notion of portfolio assessment in general and some of them with the ELP.

The first phase of the project has focused on three fundamental aspects of the research:

1. Analysis of the linguistic situation of the different Canadian provinces and of related official documents in education. A study of the US linguistic characteristics has also been conducted, albeit in less depth.

2. Study of existing language portfolios and of their characteristics, in particular the ELP and its underlying philosophy.
3. Study of the characteristics of aboriginal educational visions and of the compatibility (or lack thereof) of the PLP (later of LITE) with indigenous pedagogies.

In relation to these three main domains of investigations, a series of practical/operational decisions has been made, in particular concerning the format and the structure of the tool, and the languages to be used for the first phase of the project.

The second phase of the project, in progress, has expanded the conceptualisation of the tool, moving from the PLP to LITE, pursues the developmental research and seeks to create a finalised draft of LITE. The first part of this draft, consisting of the master template beta version, is expected to be ready for trialling by mid-2016.

A third phase is foreseen, starting at the end of the project, once both the master template and the portfolio content have been finalised, aiming at validating the tool and at studying its assets and limitations in the educational practice.

First phase: Conceptualisation

Linguistic diversity and the institutional reaction

The first phase started with a documentary research aiming at providing a thorough overview of the linguistic situation of both Canada and the US. The data published by the official statistics bodies (Statistics Canada and US Census Bureau) and their evolution since 2000 were studied. The results showed a very dynamic linguistic and cultural panorama, with a growing number of languages and of people speaking a language other than the official one(s) at home, due mainly to the high immigration rate. It also showed a geographically vast and numerically important presence of aboriginal languages, albeit without a growing trend.

Subsequently, a thorough analysis of the institutional documents in the domain of language education in Canada has been conducted both at the national and at the provincial level with the goal of checking if such growing linguistic and cultural diversity had been integrated in the educational practice. As I mentioned earlier in the article, we discovered a clear discrepancy between discourse and practice when it comes to integration of language diversity and plurilingualism. In fact, while many overarching policy and curriculum documents advocate for teachers to encourage and support multiple language use in their classrooms, there is an absence of official documents that actually provide practitioners with the tools and support that they need to do so. For instance, although the subject curriculum documents

published by the Ontario Ministry of Education do include information regarding multiple language use and first language maintenance, these are always relegated to the margins of these documents. Additionally, there are no activities outlined within the core content of the curriculum documents for implementing a plurilingual approach, nor grading schemata that would allow teachers the opportunity to value or grade the additional language resources that their students possess. Ontario curricula in general do not include an explicit focus on the multiple languages that are likely to be represented in a diverse classroom, a practice that would probably increase cross-cultural understanding of the students in a much broader and more representational way than a linguistic focus that is limited to Canada's two official languages. All this renders implementation of multiple language use in the classroom implicitly *optional*, *ad hoc*, or *idiosyncratic*. And this scenario, which applies to Ontario, the most populated Canadian province, is replicated with little variation in other provinces.

This documentary research confirmed how critical it is to move from theory to practice, and to develop a tool able to facilitate the adoption of a plurilingual approach in the classroom.

Study of existing documents and supporting experimentation

Once we had a clear view of the *status quo*, we turned to existing experiences and tools for inspiration. It was natural then to look at the Council of Europe experience and documents in the domain of language education, in particular the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001), the Autobiography of Cultural Encounters (Council of Europe nd) and, above all, the ELP.

While we recognise the vast political, economic, and linguistic differences between the European context and the North American one, we ultimately believe that the latter can greatly benefit from the fundamental aims of the ELP. The ELP is a document that allows learners to engage in self-assessment of their language competencies (in multiple languages) based on the CEFR. Essentially, the ELP aims at fostering the Council of Europe's commitment to education for democratic citizenship and lifelong learning by promoting plurilingualism, respect for cultural and linguistic diversity, increased learner autonomy and life-long learning (Little 2009, 2011). In the European context, the ELP has been utilised in many different language-learning contexts with excellent results (Schärer 2007, Stoicheva, Hughes and Speitz 2009). Furthermore, conceiving of a tool that shows some coherence with these European documents will support the vision articulated in the 2010 document published by the CMEC (2010), which advocates for the official adoption of the CEFR in Canada to improve language education and value cultural diversity.

In this phase, we proceeded with a second documentary research on

the existing ELP models and literature on the ELP use and impact, and listed all the features and underpinning principles we considered relevant to our own prospective tool. On top of learner autonomy that we already mentioned above, reflective skills, learner responsibility and CEFR-based self-assessment of language competences were the main aspects underlined by different studies on the impact of the ELP (Bompolou 2012, Egel 2009, Kühn and Cavana 2012, Stoicheva et al 2009, Yilmaz and Akcan 2012). Furthermore, the analysis of the ELP models showed that the reflective dimension of the documents, particularly the metalinguistic/metacultural and the metacognitive ones took more and more space and played an ever-growing role with the time, from the first models to the most recent ones.

To get a more complete picture, we also researched existing North American portfolios and their use. There have been some North American adaptations of the ELP model, such as LinguaFolio® developed by the US National Council of States Supervisors of Foreign Languages (Cummins 2007b, National Council of State Supervisors for Languages 2011) and LinguaFolio Online developed by the University of Oregon's Center for Applied Second Language Teaching and Learning (Center for Applied Second Language Teaching and Learning 2008). But language portfolios have not yet been widely implemented. In particular, no language portfolio exists that is rooted in the specific Canadian linguistic landscape, and that aims at overcoming the *monolingual disposition* of North American education and at valuing existing linguistic diversity. Generally, Canadian language portfolios, such as the Collaborative Language Portfolio Assessment (Manitoba Labour and Immigration 2009) and the Second Language Research Institute of Canada School-Based Language Portfolio (nd), have limited themselves to focusing on linguistic competences (providing learners with the self-assessment checklists that are based upon the CEFR levels scales) rather than explicitly fostering cultural and linguistic diversity and a plurilingual dimension.

While the pedagogical function of self-assessment is important to promote learner autonomy and motivation (Little 2009), other aspects of the ELP, particularly those aiming at developing metacognition in all forms as well as intercultural awareness, were more relevant for the scope of our project and potentially able to help students develop life-long learning skills and to embrace a plurilingual vision.

This documentary research was complemented by a related local research and development project conducted by the US partner within their 4-week language immersion programme for students from 8th through 12th grade in the US, offered in Arabic, Chinese, French, German and Spanish.

A Student Learning Portfolio was developed to capture student learning and transformation across a broad spectrum of outcomes in the areas

of language proficiency, cultural knowledge, intercultural communication and competency, and 21st century learning strategies. The design of the portfolio drew upon different documents developed both in Europe and in the US[2]. The portfolio was tested during the summer of 2013 with 800 students learning all the languages offered. Even though this Portfolio was different from LITE, the positive experimentation of such a tool provided extra solid ground for the development of LITE and reinforced the idea of the feasibility of (and value in) drawing inspiration from the European documents and projects to produce a specific tool tailored to the needs and reality of the North American context.

A new ideological and pedagogical perspective: The aboriginal point of view

The main new feature of LITE and a crucial one for introducing real change in the North American context is its role of bridge linking western and indigenous epistemologies in education.

In order to seek secure ground in this domain of knowledge and research, we conducted first an extensive documentary research and literature review, with the aim of seeking compatibility between the LINCDIRE project, and its resulting tool LITE, and the ongoing discussion about aboriginal revitalisation in the educational culture in Canada. We then integrated this with an exploratory study after receiving ethics clearance from the University of Toronto ethics board. The study consisted of a series of interviews of aboriginal educators. Two of the aboriginal educators interviewed were working in a reservation school and one was working at the university level and teaching an internationally acclaimed open online course on Aboriginal Worldviews and Education.

The findings from these interviews were highly encouraging as they stressed the importance of the language to the revitalisation of indigenous cultures: 'almost **every education movement** in indigenous communities **is about language**' (author's emphasis) . . . 'just to talk about how language and worldview are so intimately connected . . . So, it's very valuable . . . the value of different languages giving you different insights into the way things are related or the way things work'. Certainly different voices also exist, but the awareness of the importance of the language comes out clearly when one participant reported some of these different discourses in their community and commented: '. . . *like "oh, that's the past, we gotta get on with what's new and our current reality", and* ***I think they're missing out on, on a big part of what makes them unique, is the language*****'** (author's emphasis).

One of the interviewees stressed how teaching aboriginal languages requires a different approach, where context and community play a crucial role: 'The classroom is such a strange space to be learning these languages that evolved in certain activities and relationships with land, and with community . . . some say the language is from the land . . .' and also 'Unless . . . they're

being taught in a way that's engaging to them too, it's not going to be passed on'.

Aboriginal languages occur intergenerationally and within the family unit. Learner autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and connecting young learners with family and community are emphasised as essential components to the successful study of any of these languages. One important point stressed was how the community members need to be seen as *allies* rather than someone who put extra stress on the youth, generating feelings like 'if I don't pick this up, I'll be the last person who ever spoke this language in my family, or something like that'. This same point was reinforced by approaching it from a different angle: 'if those ones who have facility and fluency aren't helping them [the younger generation], instead they're teasing them, making fun of them, in way that feels . . . I mean, there's for teasing, but my understanding that this is like this real putting down that happens. That makes it, makes you just not want to try at all'. The exchange ended with a concluding remark, which showed both awareness of the issue and hope: 'I think that's something that's important for the communities to, for speakers to understand too that this is hard for those learners, and they need your help'.

Those core values expressed in the interviews, among others, thoroughly align with the LITE's aims to increase autonomy and foster linguistic and cultural pride by providing a forum to reflect on life experiences and develop intergenerational connections. By allowing learners to showcase their linguistic competency and personal experiences, LITE could also assist in revealing untapped resources of speakers of aboriginal languages seeking teacher accreditation. By offering a holistic alternative to standards-based assessment and by providing space for plurilingualism, LITE could contribute to overturning the vision of languages as discrete entities and foster openness and translanguaging. Also, the technological focus of LITE could assist in linking learners of common languages living in geographically disparate locations, thus overcoming the limitation represented by the many individuals who, when seeking to connect with their indigenous identity through language, often end up by studying one offered locally. This removal of geographical barriers could indeed contribute to language reclamation efforts.

To sum up, the conceptualisation of LITE has followed three parallel threads: 1) analysis of the present situation concerning language diversity and of the institutional response; 2) analysis of existing tools and resources developed in a different geographical context following a partially related philosophy together with a related experimentation testing transferability and adequacy to the North American context; and 3) study of the guiding principles of the indigenous pedagogies and epistemologies related to education supported by empirical data collection.

All these threads have confirmed the need for a tool able to act as a catalyser for valuing linguistic and cultural diversity and as a bridge towards

integration of western and indigenous visions. It has also confirmed the need for a tool able to raise the status of heritage and aboriginal languages by integrating formal and informal/non-formal learning (Piccardo and Ortiz 2013)[3].

Developing LITE: A work in progress

Rationale for methodological and linguistic choices

The type of work carried out during the first phase of the project responds to the criteria of developmental research. This methodology is also guiding the second phase of the project, which is in progress.

Developmental research 'is a way to establish new procedures, techniques and tools based upon a methodical analysis of specific cases. As such, developmental research can have a function of either creating generalisable conclusions or statements of law, or producing context-specific knowledge that serves a problem solving function' (Richey and Klein 2005:24).

The methodology chosen for the LINCDIRE project aiming at developing LITE can best be described by what Richey and Klein term 'Type 1 developmental research [which has a] focus upon a given instrumental product, program, process, or tool [and often addresses] not only product design and development, but evaluation as well' (2005:24–25).

van den Akker characterises developmental research as a 'balance between development and research' (1999:6). Fundamental to our project is such a balanced process by which we are developing a portfolio based on a blend of extensive theoretical research (on portfolio use, plurilingualism and the cultural and linguistic needs of Canadian and US students, as well as indigenous pedagogies and epistemologies), and of local, on-site practical research with students and educators. Furthermore, our decision to engage in developmental research to create, pilot and evaluate LITE responds to van den Akker's call for 'more evolutionary (interactive, cyclic, spiral) approaches' (1999:2) in the development of complex educational reform policies.

An important element of developmental research is its potential to 'meet . . . the pressing needs of practitioners' and to address a problem that 'is currently critical to the profession' (Richey and Klein 2005:25). The increasing linguistic and cultural diversity of the classes represents a challenge for teachers who are demanding support and tools. This paired with a growing interest in aboriginal languages and cultures calls for a context-specific research, a blend of research and practice, leading to practical results (looked at through various theoretical lenses), which will allow broader implications to be made. 'Developmental studies are often structured in phases. For example . . . a Type 1 study would include phases directed toward first analysis, then

prototype development and testing, and finally prototype revision and retesting' (Richey and Klein 2005:26). LITE follows precisely this type of organisation.

Our second phase started in late 2014 with the development of the prototype. Initially, under the inspiration of the ELP and other European documents, we had envisaged the creation of one single document, which would have then been made available in different languages and both online and on paper. This initial idea of the team has been submitted to selected practitioners for feedback and then discussed again in the team. The second version of the prototype was then designed. This version, which is presently being technically developed, consists of:

- a master template relying on iconic representation with virtually no use of words
- a range of categories conceived for facilitating the creation of personalised and multimodal portfolio content in different languages.

Both the master template and the portfolio content will be made available (along with related resources) on a website designed for students and educators.

In the pilot version of LITE, in addition to English and French, the two official languages, two heritage languages, German and Italian, and one aboriginal language, Ojibwe (from the Anishinaabe language family) will be included.

The rationale for choosing Italian and German is twofold: 1) they are heritage languages with a significant population of immigrants in Canada (the country's fourth and fifth largest language group respectively according to the 2011 Census (Statistics Canada 2012) and well present among the heritage languages of the US); 2) there is an interest in studying these two languages for reasons linked to family origin and/or interest in arts, music and culture. For German there is also an increase in study and research exchanges as well as internships in Germany (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst 2012). Besides, we have had a strong interest in the project coming from German and Italian instructors.

Ojibwe was chosen for two reasons: 1) it is one of Canada's aboriginal languages that has a sufficiently large population of fluent speakers to be secure from long-term extinction (Crystal 2000, Fettes 1998, Norris 1998, Sarkar and Metallic 2009), making it a priority choice for language maintenance or revitalisation (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996); besides, it is the sole language with provincial funding for cultural centres strategising language maintenance and pedagogy (Hill 2004); 2) the base of Ojibwe speakers is geographically well situated for our research, distributed across central Canada, and well into the US and an explicit focus on Ojibwe exists within the University of Toronto community, including language classes,

ceremonies, linguistic and documentary research, workshops, and community events.

The main evolution between the initial concept and the present design was linked to the need for consistency between the rationale of LITE and its actual shape and configuration. The feedback given suggested it was important not to privilege any particular language but to rely upon visual/iconic representation of concepts as much as possible, something that is also very consistent with indigenous epistemologies. The idea of a *language-neutral* master template able to flexibly accommodate language-specific portfolio content also underlines the needs for securing space for culture-specific sections. It also helped us understand that users need to be granted the freedom to mix languages if we really want to be coherent with the plurilingualism framework adopted. The rationale for going completely paperless includes free access, ease in overcoming geographical barriers, increased possibility of customising and of filing and eventually to create a record. Finally, after common refection following the feedback, we decided to focus on late teens and young adults at first in order to span from secondary to post-secondary education and to include community centres. Furthermore, a focus on younger learners would need an extra phase of linguistic adaptation of the portfolio content, so this can be a longer-term project.

In general, gathering feedback from potential users will play a crucial role in the conceptualisation of LITE which has been, and will continue to be, informed by teacher and student input and therefore strongly shaped by their articulated needs. Rather than a top-down prescriptive, pedagogical approach, the design of LITE will be highly dependent on the research site and the opinions and experiences of site-based participants (teachers, students and elders). Research participants' involvement in shaping the portfolio will also provide opportunities for their own professional development. As Richey and Klein (2005) argue, the developmental approach allows for research that is intertwined with 'real world practice', creating a 'loop with practice informing research and research, in turn, informing practice' (Richey and Klein 2005:35).

Conclusion: Where we are now, next development and potential impact of LITE

As we said at the beginning, LITE is a work in progress and the first phase of the research confirmed that there is space and need for such a tool so that students can: 1) acquire a new attitude towards language and cultural diversity; 2) be more motivated to learn languages; and 3) become more reflexive and autonomous in their language learning processes. Specifically, LITE can target several areas by helping learners:

- record their experience learning languages and show what they can do in different languages (metacognition)
- think about how they learn languages best and strategies used (cognitive strategies)
- organise language learning as a way to show how much they have already learned (language learning assessment)
- set future goals to help them learn more about the languages they are studying and other languages (linguistic goals)
- record stories and traditions about their culture and share them with friends, family, and the school community (cultural awareness)
- record intercultural experiences they have had with other people so they can learn more about other cultures (intercultural awareness).

At a broader level, LITE has the potential to:

- support the maintenance and appreciation of a plurality of languages and cultures at both individual and social levels
- allow students to develop awareness of their language learning process
- provide recognition for all of their linguistic and cultural resources from their first language(s) to languages with which they have had contact
- promote an explicit focus on language diversity and provide a place for students to record and monitor their abilities in any language
- foster autonomy in language learning through a synchronous and asynchronous collaborative online tool
- foster creativity through artwork developed by learners using several types of media (audio, video, drawings, photographs, storytelling, among others).

LITE will facilitate a process of increased language awareness, as students will be provided with a medium to engage with and reflect upon home or community languages that may not be included in the ordinary school curriculum. In the long term, educators will be provided with portfolio content in multiple languages together with resources and guidance to help students create and upload a personalised version of LITE that best suits their linguistic and cultural needs. Thus, students who do not speak the dominant languages of the school will have access to a resource in their first (or one of their first) languages. This process will likely begin to increase attention to minoritised languages in the community, and to foster interaction with speakers of non-dominant languages. The process of recording and reflecting upon contacts with languages and cultures, even very brief ones, that LITE enables and supports, will help students realise that their linguistic experiences are important sources of linguistic, cultural and self-knowledge. Over time, this will foster students' interest in learning languages

that they had previously dismissed or been unaware of and engage them in self-directed language learning.

Through a tool that emphasises reflection on the learning process – of any language – and of intercultural encounters rather than solely on learning outcomes in one – or more – specific language, we intend to enhance awareness of individual learning preferences, practices and strategies, as well as to identify factors that foster or that hinder students' learning and motivation.

For universities to better educate future plurilingual global citizens ready for the professional world, LITE supports broader pedagogical and practical objectives: 1) it assists students to gain a better understanding of their learning progress, and skill development; 2) it cultivates the recognition of transferable skills trained in language learning, such as creativity, flexibility, adaptability and problem-solving; and 3) it develops the metacommunicative tools to utilise and describe their competences to prospective employers. The positive approach of LITE can facilitate intrinsic motivation, a crucial factor in student success, countering possible reluctance in learning languages, particularly when mandated.

Finally the increased language awareness and desire to further one's own linguistic and cultural competencies can support current aboriginal language revitalisation efforts. In fact, despite the lack of official language policy for aboriginal languages in Canada (the US passed the US Native American Languages Act in 1990 and 1992) (De Korne 2010:116), speakers of aboriginal languages in Canada are increasingly demanding status from communities and governing bodies (Corbiere 2000, Pheasant-Williams 2003, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996). Aboriginal communities in Canada are deeply committed to revitalising their ancestral languages, and we seek to act as allies to these communities by engaging collaboratively, developing a tool that can support these language revitalisation processes.

As 'indigenous languages . . . structure indigenous knowledge' (Battiste 2002:17), creating legitimate space for minoritised languages in the classroom will result in balancing hegemonic *Euro-American* pedagogies that characterise North American educational institutions with indigenous epistemologies and in supporting non-dominant knowledge as well.

Introducing LITE in the Canadian context has the potential to shift entrenched language hierarchies that privilege the country's two official languages and to empower linguistic minorities by changing attitudes towards all languages and cultures, even those marginalised or neglected. A tool can facilitate a plurilingual paradigm shift (Kramsch et al 2008) by recognising the diverse linguistic and cultural competencies that are possessed by all individuals, and acknowledging the interconnectedness of language, culture, lived experiences and identity negotiation.

Notes

1. Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of the Heritage of Indigenous Peoples Elaborated by the Special Rapporteur, Mrs. Erica-Irene Daes, in conformity with resolution 1993/44 and decision 1994/105 of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities of the Commission on Human Rights, Economic and Social Council, United Nations (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1995/26, GE. 95-12808 (E), 21 June 1995).
2. In particular different models of the ELP (www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/, the ACTFL/NCSSFL) LinguaFolio Project (www.ncssfl.org/LinguaFolio/index.php?linguafolio_index), and the Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to languages and cultures (FREPA-CARAP) (2012) (carap.ecml.at/).
3. *Formal learning* is something happening in an organised and structured context, for instance in an educational institution or training/working place), is specifically identified as learning (in terms of objectives, time and resources), it is intentionally done by the learner, and finally it results in validation and certification. *Informal learning* is a consequence of everyday life activities linked to work, family or leisure. It is neither organised nor structured and is done non-intentionally by the learner. Finally, *non-formal learning* is integrated in planned activities that are not explicitly identified as learning activities but imply some form of learning. Non-formal learning is done intentionally by the learner (CEDEFOP 2009).

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